



# PUBLISH OR PERISH? COMMUNICATING RESEARCH WITH THE PUBLIC

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## INTRODUCTION

The saying, “publish or perish” left me agitated, wondering about my ultimate academic destiny at the beginning of my doctoral studies. Whether I would succeed or fail seemed to depend on whether I publish or not. At one point, I heard the saying so often it left me confused as to whether doing a postgraduate degree was about studying or publishing. I was fully aware that publishing is the pulse that keeps alive the ideas that I worked hard to formulate. I kept wondering about two related aspects: if I published, who would read my work? And, as scholarly publishing is a lengthy process, how long would it take before my ideas would circulate into the public domain? I observed one established academic who liked to publish in newspapers but was annoyed when the readers complained that they found his articles too difficult to understand. Looking at the comments of his frustrated readers, I wondered if academics really intended to communicate to anyone at all, or just to themselves.

That one could publish scholarly works and yet find no readers, or publish in newspapers and fail to be understandable to the ordinary reader highlighted to me that the idea of effective communication is often not captured by the saying, “publish or perish”. Von Winterfeldt (2013:14055) bemoans that “scientific information is rarely accessible in a format useful for decision making”. This statement emphasises that scientists publish in a way that does not communicate to the public, in this case, the decision makers. This inaccessibility of valuable information to its intended audience nullifies the great and costly effort invested into its construction. This chapter affirms that without publishing scholarly works in books, journals and monographs, academics can indeed perish. However, this chapter more importantly highlights

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that the saying should be underscored by the idea of effective communication to a broader audience. As I learned during my doctoral studies, academics should not only publish for fellow academics, but also for the public – in a manner that is accessible to them.

To highlight the significance of fulfilling the saying, “publish or perish” in a communicative way, I start this chapter with a reflection on my own experience of what prompted me to communicate and share my research with the public during my studies. I then argue that fulfilling the principle, “publish or perish” in a manner that accommodates the public, requires a sense of partnership and hospitality towards the public. The chapter describes aspects involved in sharing research during postgraduate studies and offers a brief discussion of the steps that postgraduate students can take to develop skills to share their research with the public. I also highlight the risks that come with sharing your research with the public. The chapter closes with a brief discussion on what postgraduate students stand to benefit by sharing their research with the public during the course of their studies<sup>1</sup>.

### A QUEST FOR RELEVANCE

My interest in learning and developing ways of communicating to the public was stirred by the question, “How can my postgraduate studies be relevant to my community that is riddled with poverty?” When I started planning my study, I was captivated by the African Renaissance and became interested in developing a skill that would contribute meaningfully to the re-awakening of Africa. I did not just want a PhD; I wanted to do something that would empower me to play a relevant and transformative role in my community. I remember agonising over a statement by a Zimbabwean theologian, Ezra Chitando (2010:199), “[t]he seed of poverty thrives on the rich soils of Africa”. Chitando’s statement fittingly contextualised South Africa, a country so rich and yet at the same time so utterly poor. Thinking through this, the question that kept haunting me was, “How could my doctoral studies be relevant and useful in this context of rich soils that cultivate poverty and death?”

According to Baram-Tsabari and Lewenstein (2013:57), “learning science means learning to talk science with its own semantic patterns and specific ways of making meaning”. This statement is true about all fields of study. By specialising in a particular field, one ends up talking that field with its semantics and ways of making meaning, which are often beyond the grasp of the public. As Von Winterfeldt (2013:14055)

<sup>1</sup> Also read the chapter by Simangele Mayisela (Chapter 3), where the ethical responsibility of the postgraduate student to communicate with non-academic audiences – in this case, respondents – is highlighted.

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shows, in some cases, “only a small group of scientific peers can understand” this produced body of knowledge. In a country such as South Africa which is in desperate need for solutions to unlock the logjam of poverty, and un(der)development of knowledge is irresponsible. In order for my new discoveries to be relevant to my community, I have to learn to communicate in terms that are accessible to the public.

What steps could I practically take to achieve this? A workshop organised by the division responsible for postgraduate skills development on communicating science to the public at my university helped me put my quest for relevance to my community into perspective. The workshop introduced the basic skills of public speaking and writing science articles in popular language. The workshop showed me that academics can be agents of change in their communities by translating their scientifically created knowledge into the language of ordinary people. This meant that I should add to my skills acquisition “the ability to use *nontechnical* language and norms” (Baram-Tsabari & Lewenstein 2013:58). Learning to think in nontechnical language and norms would enable me to participate in platforms such as newspapers, public media, community meetings and even symposiums. These platforms provide useful opportunities to share your research findings with the public. Thus, I learned that academics should not just publish; they should also communicate. I discovered that while I still needed to strive to publish in academic journals, I did not have to depend on academic publishing to engage with my community. I could employ other means of communication, such as popular media, seminars and community meetings to address the relevant issues.

**COMMUNICATING SCIENCE AS PARTNERSHIP AND HOSPITABILITY**

Sharing research with the public involves two processes encapsulated by the ideas of partnership and hospitality. Partnership refers to the idea of your responsibility in sharing knowledge with your community. The idea of partnership comes from an illustration narrated by one of the conveners of a workshop on communicating science to the public about a student who shared her research findings with her ruralised grandmother. With great pride, the grandmother passed on the knowledge to her village community. In this illustration emerged a sense of the granddaughter being a delegate sent by her community on a mission of discovery, from which she returned to her community to report back on her findings. Ultimately, for me, this image translates to a sense of accountability to my community and to the taxpayers who contribute to the reality of my university education. The grandmother’s interest in her granddaughter’s postgraduate studies must have challenged the granddaughter to think beyond publishing in academic journals only, and consider communicating

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with the public as well. This illustration reminds me of the Biblical parable in which a person lights a lamp and then hides it under a bowl instead of putting it on the table where it lights up the whole house (Matthew 5:15). Limiting her sense of community to the academic world would have been the same as hiding her light under a bowl.

The idea of hospitality emphasises the aspect of inviting your community into a knowledge space where fresh ideas and insights are shared. As Gathogo (2007:108-109) shows, hospitality is a strong component of the ethic of the Ubuntu concept: “I am because you are”<sup>2</sup>. Being privileged to embark on postgraduate studies, I need to share what I have learned with my community. As someone from a village, I have learned that village meetings, community gatherings, church gatherings and even workshops are useful avenues for sharing my science. South Africa has an oral culture where we like to tell and listen to stories. In communicating my research, I have utilised these mediums.

When I share my research with the public, I often think of the openness of my university to the public. It is a fit analogy of partnership and hospitality that the university campus is not a fenced-off space but open to the public. The public can walk through the campus and interact with the learned and the learning. The botanical gardens are also open to the public. These are significant imageries that highlight how research is shared with the public. All the main pathways in the main campus converge on top of the university’s underground library. The layout of the campus essentially demonstrates that the university exists and conducts its teaching activities for the public. As an emergent academic, I feel it is my obligation to play a part in the interaction between the university and the community. Communicating with the public is not only a form of accountability to these silent partners, but also includes them in the process and benefits of postgraduate research. It is an expression of our responsibilities as academics.

## SHARING RESEARCH DURING POSTGRADUATE STUDIES

The critical underlying question in sharing research with the public is: what should be shared? With adequate preparation you can share anything from your research at any level, even at the initial stages. You can share the concepts, aspects, findings and also the problem issues you encountered during your studies. You can share the skills and abilities that you acquired during your studies. Sharing of knowledge can be approached by answering questions such as, “what discoveries am I making?”, “what skills am I learning and developing?” or “how do the new insights emerging in

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2 Also see the chapter by Langutani Masehela (Chapter 12) in this book that focusses on Ubuntu.

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my study affect my understanding of, for example, the problem of xenophobia in South Africa?" During the early stages of my research, as I was formulating my research proposal, I would talk to people about the questions, ideas and perspectives I was pondering and even important literature sources during my reading. The discussions contributed meaningfully to finding the focus of my research. During the research stages, as I began to grapple with particular concepts and perspectives while I got deeper into my research, it meant that I had much more substantive knowledge to share.

Since the sharing of research is an act of partnership and hospitality, it is conducted in the language of the audience. As a good partner and host you speak the language of your listeners (Baram-Tsabari & Lewenstein 2013:58). To be willing to communicate to the public requires confidence in the usefulness and meaningfulness of your research within the current South African context. I seize opportunities to share my research with the public because I am confident that, while I can make only a small and limited contribution, my work can contribute meaningfully and usefully towards the realisation of a better South Africa. As an emerging academic, I endeavour to be confident that I have something important to contribute, and that it can be communicated in terms that are understandable to the public. However, diligent care must be taken to avoid being overly simplistic and condescending. We all want people to communicate with us and not speak over our heads. We all want knowledgeable people to make sense to us. Rather than being technical, complex and merely seeking to impress people with my knowledge, I have found that I need to keep the discussion along the lines of what I am studying and what I am discovering in my research. The personal skills I am developing enable me to strike interesting conversations with members of the public.

My university has for some time been holding an annual competition for postgraduate students on communicating science. By participating in the competition, I discovered that all science can be shared with lay people. Knowledge that has taken a complex and lengthy process to develop can be shared within a time segment that is as short as six minutes. At first, it seemed ridiculous to me to allocate such a small amount of time to a meaningful communication of science knowledge. While preparing our presentations, we kept wondering if it was at all possible to communicate anything sensible in such a short amount of time. However, the important lesson that I learned was that one does not need a lot of time to communicate sensibly and effectively. When I told a friend about sharing one's research in six minutes with the public, he mockingly dismissed the whole affair. "It's not possible; I have too much data," he replied. Yet this six-minute thesis competition taught me that with good public

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speaking skills I can explain my research concisely, to a variety of people, using appropriate slides and visual aids. Participating in this process taught me to think in snippets and morsels that the public can easily digest.

Should the postgraduate student always initiate the process and be in charge of the communication process? A good host must also, at times, be a good guest. To find opportunities of sharing your research, it is necessary to look out for bona fide calls for papers and presentations even in popular spaces, and make a constructive and an informed contribution. I have attended community meetings and open forums as part of the ordinary crowd, and found that the slot allocated to questions and discussions provided me with an opportunity to share my research by asking questions, making comments and providing alternative perspectives. Such participation has led to opportunities of being invited as a speaker at future events, simply from asking questions and making constructive contributions during the presentations of others. I particularly cherish the discussions that take place during the coffee-breaks of such events, as they are valuable opportunities to meet and share my knowledge with the public and those outside my field of study.

Electronic and social media also make it easy and fast to distribute information. Most online newspapers have a comment section where you can respond and interact with other people about an article. From the perspective of your research, you can use the comment section to interact and discuss topical issues related to your field. By carefully choosing appropriate spaces of sharing your research with the public, you can provide a useful and meaningful alternative. When you really put your mind to it, the possibilities of sharing your research during the process of postgraduate studies are endless. Online forums such as *The Conversation* and *Scibraai* provide spaces to share your research as well as interact with seasoned researchers.

## RISKS IN COMMUNICATING SCIENCE TO THE PUBLIC

Communicating science to the public, particular while still studying, has risks. Not many people may be willing to trust the insights of a student. Even as a postgraduate student you still have a limited audience and reception because people would rather trust a qualified expert than an apprentice. This risk means that a prerequisite quality in communicating your research with the public is to be prepared to be a “suspect”. Respect and confidence from the public is often earned by demonstrating tenacity and maturity. Furthermore, communicating your research to the public exposes you to criticism and public scrutiny, which could be harsh at times. However, if you aspire to make your research relevant to your community, or if you wish to pursue a lifelong academic career, you must be prepared to face criticism positively.

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As an emerging academic in a South African context it is important to realise that the basic African worldview of life is permeated with traditional cultures and religious beliefs that have “supplied the answers to many of the problems of this life” (Mbiti 2015:15). In the South African context, this dynamic shapes the “science-citizen relations” (Irwin 2014:161) in that the century-old, tried-and-tested cultural and religious values function as the framework of interpreting new science-tested solutions. Von Winterfeldt (2013:14055-14056) highlights that the bridge between scientific knowledge and decision making is affected by beliefs and values. Therefore, in communicating your new scientifically tested research findings you stand to challenge deeply valued assumptions and traditions that have been the pillar and security of the society. This means guarding against the communication strategy of the “first-order” approach that treats the public as an empty vessel and thus uses “top-down” (or “one-way”) communication (Irwin 2014:162-208). Rather, the strategy must adopt lower-order approaches of communicating science that recognise the public as concerned stakeholders that can contribute towards finding solutions to the problems they face (Irwin 2014:203-209). This means that communicating science to the public is a political exercise due to the sensitivity and the threatening nature of new data. This “call[s] for engaging in a respectful dialogue with the public” (Baram-Tsabari & Lewenstein 2013:58).

Fortunately, academics often allay the public of their fears, resulting in an embrace that grants the researcher trust and at times unquestioned authority. Moreover, when research findings are trusted as an outcome of a rigorous and objective scientific process, it may result in unquestioned public confidence in you as a researcher. The mere fact that you communicate tested and authenticated findings, not mere opinions, earns you a position of authority and trust in the community. This demands that researchers use the trust and confidence given to them honourably and responsibly. Therefore, as Fischhoff point out, effective science communication “inform[s] people about the benefits, risks, and other costs of their decisions, thereby allowing them to make sound choices” (2013:14033). Ethical integrity must be observed when communicating research with the public.

**DEVELOPING THE SKILLS OF SHARING YOUR RESEARCH FINDINGS**

It is true that communicating research is a specialised process. But, it is also true that communication is an art and skill that can be learned, developed and improved (Besley & Tanner 2011:255-257). The communication of scientific knowledge involves the sharing of proven or tested information, educated assumptions and factual data. Sharing, therefore, requires proper and thoughtful planning to make it effective.

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To learn and develop the skill of communicating with the public, the university is the place to start. Look out for opportunities at your university to acquire communication skills. The department of postgraduate skills development at my university runs a number of courses and seminars including public speaking and writing. The writing laboratory also offers assistance with writing skills. The workshop on communicating science addresses topics such as how to plan and structure a presentation. You also learn how to plan and lay out slides, and how to effectively use pictures and illustrations.

Most student development departments offer many useful career-enhancing training at minimal or no cost.

## CONCLUSION

Sharing your research with the public during your postgraduate studies can benefit both the student and the research project. In this chapter, I have challenged postgraduate students to respond to the saying, “publish or perish” and encouraged students to communicate with the public. By publishing scholarly works such as articles, reports, books and monographs, academics remain alive. To be relevant in the South African context, it is not enough to write only for other academics; ordinary people can also be empowered by the knowledge created at universities.

I find that communicating to a wide audience keeps me grounded in the issues that affect my community, and constantly challenges me to be relevant. In the light of the myriad of complex problems South Africa faces, postgraduate students need to remain connected to the community by providing solutions to these problems. Postgraduate studies can be a lonely journey and sharing your knowledge with the public unlocks opportunities for support and companionship. Sharing your research with the public during the course of your studies is also beneficial to your research as it places it in the context of the lived experiences of your community. This sharing is an act of partnership and hospitality towards the community that benefits not only the student but also the community.

Communication is a skill and an art that can be acquired and developed. By taking advantage of opportunities to learn how to effectively communicate with the public – such as skills development and public speaking programmes offered by many universities – postgraduate students can include the public in their research to the benefit of the community and the country.



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